

Cleansing

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p 177-183

1. THE FIRST ATTACK

[Gideon has just treated his fostered family – father Youssef, mother Karima, daughter Loubna and son Rafiq – to a trip to Bruges, also known as ‘Bruges-la-Morte’.]

The oppressive mood in which we wished each other good night on arriving home, before plodding off to our own rooms, didn’t at that point seem to possess any prophetic power. We took it for melancholy after an exhausting and far too hot day.

Tomorrow we would wake refreshed and start a new day in good spirits. The situation in which the five of us and one animal were living together wasn’t altogether ideal, but it was far from desperate, certainly compared to the fate of millions of others. It would be churlish to complain. We could get by alright, in relative luxury even. And we’d go on doing so until that damned war, three thousand kilometres away, was finally over. That had to happen eventually. In the meantime we were living in the best of all possible worlds.

It could have been far worse.

Less than a week later the war came to us. In the form of a suicide attack on our world-famous train station, which we called, with some pride, our railway cathedral. Three jihadis fired kalashnikovs in all directions before blowing themselves up with home-made explosive belts. One of the belts failed to detonate, but still there were almost forty dead and more than a hundred wounded, twenty of them sustaining life-threatening injuries.

Once the initial investigation by the security services and police detectives had been completed, Extreme Cleansing was contracted to clear up the debris. It was our biggest job yet.

I never knew what it was that upset Youssef most. The sickening cleaning work and everything it triggered in the form of memories, or the fact that such an ambitious attack could happen so close to home, with everything it brought bubbling to the surface in the form of depressing déjà-vues. At any rate he was never the same after setting foot in our pitifully smashed up railway cathedral.

Or no, actually the metamorphosis had taken place a short time before. With his sombre silence and his faraway look, first at the breakfast table and then in the tram that took us to the scene of the crime.

Teams of reporters from home and abroad were still there, on the lookout for fresh titbits and catchy soundbites. The journalists, most of them armed with showy microphones and assisted by photographers or TV crews, were massed on the pavement, right next to the heavily guarded entrance. There they tried to elicit comments from everyone who'd been given permission to enter the disaster area. To little effect. A few politicians and local worthies came on their own initiative to demonstrate their sympathy and express their fury, in terms that varied hardly at all and had already been heard and seen a day earlier on radio and television.

The reporters wearily played along. Until some of them noticed a passer-by – among the team of cleaners no less – with an appearance that was remarkably reminiscent of the only one of the three perpetrators who didn't have a beard. A photo of him was on all the front pages that day. This guy was better looking and older, true, but that would only work to his advantage on television. His hard hat and hi-vis jacket would make his reaction all the more credible, and a relevant vox pop from a forty-something from that particular social group hadn't yet landed on their editors' desks. With a bit of luck his background might be comparable to that of the attackers, and now the poor man was faced with the task of clearing away their criminal devastation.

'What impact does this have on a person, sir?' 'What does someone like you think of their motives?' 'Do you have a message for terrorists of this kind?'

As if at a signal, five reporters strode towards Youssef. All the others immediately followed – they hadn't yet seen my friend, but they didn't want to miss a chance to have someone who was presumably famous say his bit on their channel. Youssef walked past them all without stopping or answering any of their questions. He didn't so much as shrug, even when they repeated their questions in French and English while he was standing in line for the metal detector. He pulled his hard hat a bit further down over his forehead and that was all.

A little later, after the press had dribbled away empty handed, he was unperturbed when the soldiers at the next control post first compared his day pass with his passport three times – he had to take off his hard hat – and then carried out an extra check on his bag by hand, right down to the lunch box and the flask of coffee. They too asked questions. This time he did give a shrug in response, until a colleague intervened and he was let through without further ado.

Not a single reporter had asked me anything. If they had, I would have taken my cue from Youssef's speechlessness. Not even out of embarrassment – a vox pop from me would never make it onto the air on any subject, if only because of the time taken by each stuttered word – but because for the life of me I had no idea what to think about this attack, except that profound anger and incomprehension had combined to create what could best be described as numbness. (...)

We'd got used to an awful lot over the years. We could have sharpened our minds or blunted them – or however you want to put it – on our habituation and cynicism. But none of us could have prepared ourselves for this battlefield.

In my case at least, there was also an element of shame. Despite all the images I'd seen on my laptop of attacks and beheadings in far-off countries, and although I'd convinced myself time and again that I could see them through Youssef's eyes, it was only now that I felt directly involved, affronted, sick and angry. Not even the attacks closer to home, in London and Paris the year before, had made such a deep impression on me as this.

The difference? This was a railway station I'd visited many times, ever since childhood. It could have been me lying here, torn into lumps and shreds, spread across ten square metres. It could have been Loubna and Rafiq. This was where I'd met and greeted them for the first time, when they arrived with their mother. Later they often came to watch the performance of the high-speed trains, which arrived and departed on the lowest of the five levels, almost twenty metres below ground.

When you got out on the platform down there and looked up, you saw the magnificent nineteenth-century dome, which now towered more impressively than ever above the rails and the passengers, above the trains and the waffle stalls. Behold our railway cathedral! With its marble walls, its modern escalators and its gargantuan, old-fashioned clock. Not long ago the dome had been thoroughly restored; now barely half the panels were still whole. The terrorists must have deliberately emptied a couple of magazines into it, intending to produce a morbid spectacle. The pelting granules of safety glass, like a devastating hailstorm, had increased the number of wounded and given the dead an additional battering. They were everywhere, those hard granules, like hundreds of thousands of dulled and worthless diamonds.

(...)

Youssef and I worked as we always did, a solid pair at the heart of a team that had a high turnover. We didn't need words to coordinate our actions. That paid off after just fifteen minutes when we made a horrific discovery. The first in a whole series that day.

We'd started near the two small craters made by the explosive belts. Under a wooden advertising hoarding torn away by the blast we found the arm of a child, from the look of it not much older than about five. The arm had been ripped off, shoulder and all. To judge by the chunky toy watch around the wrist, it belonged to a boy. The limb itself was virtually unharmed. It lay there perfect and lovely, if you ignored the colour. A moment passed before Youssef summoned the courage to pick it up, after putting on the protective gloves that had been handed out to us for this sort of find. I held open a see-through plastic bag, having already noted the time and location on the label. A member of the forensic team knelt and took a photo of us. With flash.

Since first entering the scene of devastation, Youssef and I had avoided looking at each other. Now our eyes met. Briefly. And I could be wrong, but above the sadness and despair that I felt – as did he – I read in his eyes exactly what I too was thinking. Something of which I'm ashamed to this day: 'This poor child would have been better off dying immediately.' Forgive me if this shocks you, but it was what I thought. Because, given the pain and the impossibility of a full recovery, I would never have wanted to survive such a thing myself.

Not as the father either, for that matter. Perhaps the good man had been able to leave this world hand in hand with his little son. The mother too. Otherwise – how do you deal with a thing like that, as a parent? I tried, in vain, not to think about them too much more and taped the bag shut.

2.

SUPERVISOR OF ALL ATTACKS

Increasingly we were picked up by a specially protected and authorized bus, which took me and my team directly to yet another bloody attack. Had it not been a matter of acts crying out for vengeance, you might have joked that we were paid disaster tourists.

We arrived just after each horror occurred.

In due course we crisscrossed the entire country.

After the attack on the railway cathedral, peace had prevailed for a long time. The relieved public soothed itself to sleep. Acts of war once again seemed to limit themselves to distant regions where for years various armies and clans had been bombed almost routinely, of late even by a couple of planes from our own modest air force. Here at home we saw pictures of all those raids only when a hospital or a wedding feast was accidentally hit. If war has two attributes, then they're called blind chance and defenceless civilian.

The deliberate connecting up of the two is called terrorism. It crashed over us like a wave in those days. Explosions and shootings followed each other in quick succession, with a breathing space of just a few weeks, sometimes days, in between. It was as if local and imported jihadis had agreed to attack in serial formation. At the same time they tried to outdo each other in their audacity and sinister inventiveness. The act itself was no longer enough. To be effective and hip, a terrorist attack had to be not just shocking in the carnage it produced but astonishing in its unexpected means of execution.

Terrorism, I learned in those days – unfortunately as a witness in the front row – was a form of primitive theatre. Everything was done for its theatrical effect, and the players even fought among themselves for a place front of stage, hoping for brighter footlights and therefore greater celebrity than their competitors. Stage direction, decor, the symbolic value of the location, props, you name it, everything served a dual purpose: to sow fear and yet more discord among the population. Those goals were achieved only when the hysteria became hugely disproportionate to the actual damage and the means deployed. Three men and a dog could briefly look like an army. The bastards got a kick out of that too, their reward being global fame and eternal life as a martyr. They were happy to give up their lives for that. And I already disapproved of suicides. Especially when, without even asking, they made others foot the bill for their ticket to the hereafter.

In this case that was precisely the point. The more bodies around your own corpse, the greater your glory.

Along with the committed religious fascists you had the fellow travellers and the bunglers. Those turn up everywhere, so why not in the terrorism branch? I recall an idiot who, on a packed tourist boat from Liège to Maastricht, tried to set fire to his underpants, which were stuffed with explosives. But even the biggest klutz could easily cause dozens of fatalities, thereby giving his own pitiful end an air of heroism. Logically speaking the bar was set terrifyingly low. Any crazy copycat could steal a cement truck from a building site and drive it into a promenading crowd two kilometres away.

In neighbouring countries that phenomenon was already common. It became truly gruesome when a creative little eager beaver from right here at home took things to new heights – the next level, as it's called in the video games he'd been corrupting his addicted brain with for

years – in between countless bouts of wanking, as later investigations revealed. Sexual urges and a death wish? Quite often one and the same.

It was he who perpetrated the first major attack after those two explosive belts were detonated in our railway cathedral. Not far from Bruges, this time. If Youssef, his family and I had taken our trip not by train but in a hire car like before, we might ourselves have stopped at the crime scene. And if we'd done so on the black day in question, we might equally well have been among the victims, along with those thirty-plus others. The number of wounded was higher still. Many had third-degree burns over large areas of their bodies.

Astonishingly enough, the go-getter operated alone. Our first lone wolf was homegrown. Far from the last. I hadn't been familiar with the term before and I still think it's inappropriate. A wolf is a social animal, and noble too. This solitary creep had just two props: a revolver that later turned out to be fake and a professional baseball bat. With the first he forced a driver out of the cab of his tanker and with the second he smashed the poor guy's head in. The lone wolf was covered in blood, eye-witnesses confirmed afterwards. It didn't bring him to his senses. There were claims that he was under the influence, of cocaine at the very least. Although it was never officially confirmed.

After that first murder he sped the stolen tanker to a nearby petrol station, next to a busy shopping centre. He mowed down ten cyclists and pedestrians on the pavement, then rammed two of the pumps and stepped out to stand in the middle of a puddle of gurgling and spurting petrol. According to some he laughed out loud and even made 'washing gestures', rubbing himself under the arms and across the back, before shouting 'Allahu Akbar' and gibberish that sounded like 'Now you'll know what it is.' He then reached for his lighter. Two survivors testified, independently of each other, that they'd never before seen anyone with such a triumphant expression.

Another witness would never forget the sound of the flame-burst and the mild displacement of air it caused. That was the following day, when he was a guest on the most popular talkshow at the time. He'd been lucky, he only had burns on one arm, but at that point he wasn't certain whether his great-aunt and her friend would survive the disaster. They'd been sitting waiting for him in his car, right next to the rammed pumps. They were too surprised to flee, too shocked also, and had difficulty walking at the best of times. They felt it was safest to stay in the car.

The death toll would have been even higher if a petrol station attendant hadn't risked his own life by jumping into the cab of the tanker and reversing it off along the road, despite two flat and already burning front tyres. He was able to douse them some distance away with an ordinary fire extinguisher. Behind his back the petrol station exploded. With his boss inside it, who had been trying without success to shut off the supply to the pumps.

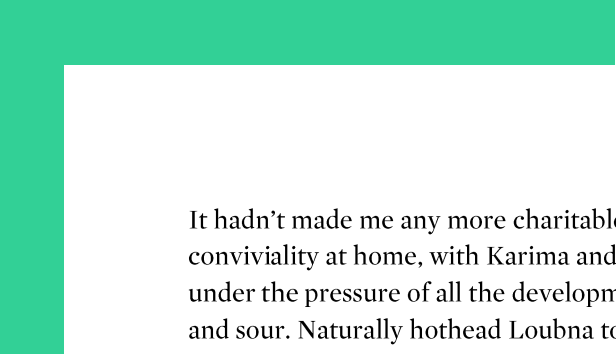
For a long time we at Extreme Cleansing thought we were over the worst. I'll spare you the sad list of how wrong we were. Anyone who insists on knowing the precise sequence of escalating outrages will have to hunt out for themselves the news reports from those dark days, which thank god are a good way behind us now. But there's one attack I want to single out here, because it turned on their heads the expectations we'd talked ourselves into.

The terrorists were in the main unmarried twenty-somethings, occasionally fathers in their thirties but always with a serious criminal past. Never elderly, never women. Or so we thought. Until a convert less than twenty years old detonated a bomb close to the finishing line of a cycle race. In the crowd she'd been both stared at and treated considerately on account of her 'blessed state', as an investigator put it later on the news.

But she wasn't heavily pregnant at all, she was nursing a nail bomb. For Extreme Cleansing's shareholders these were the most profitable years ever. For people who worked for it, the most difficult.

For me most of all.

I'd been lumbered with the job of supervisor.



It hadn't made me any more charitable. For a long time only those remaining moments of conviviality at home, with Karima and the children, were capable of salving my bruised soul. But under the pressure of all the developments outside the home, everything there too became warped and sour. Naturally hothead Loubna took the lead in that respect. Against everything and everybody.

From one day to the next the girl became irritatingly pious.

3.

THE CONVERSION OF YOUSSEF'S DAUGHTER

Loubna used to smoke like a Turk and she sometimes drank a beer on the sly in her room, humming along to the latest pop songs and sharing gossip and selfies with friends on her phone. Suddenly she swore off cigarettes and much of the rest and leaned forward on a mat three or four times a day, mumbling, her head in what I assume was the direction of Mecca.

It has to be said: her mat always had precisely the same orientation. Knowing the perfectionism of the child, she will have checked it beforehand. She usually unrolled the thing in the living room, rarely in her bedroom. Praying conspicuously seemed at least as important as the praying itself.

At first her brother and I chuckled in amazement; her mother was baffled, then furious, then distraught. But the more Karima scolded and begged, the more devoutly her daughter behaved. Only occasionally did the girl fall out of her role of pious nun and start squabbling with her mother as if their lives depended on it.

Both sides deployed plenty of expletives and recriminations, I think, because afterwards Karima would sit quietly sobbing in the kitchen and Loubna would bend over for an extra session on her mat, during which it was unclear whether her murmuring was still murmuring or her own personal way of sobbing.

At first I didn't understand much at all about what she was up to. I saw it as a cry of distress. An overwrought way to rebel against a father who had left. As time went on, however, after I'd added it all together, an additional motive became clear to me.

In the months before her conversion the girl had often got herself wound up about what she called harassment and insinuation. It might concern the severed pig's heads that were left at night, pretty much all over Europe, at the entrances to mosques. In Poland foreigners were verbally abused in the street and people of other faiths turned down for jobs. In Hungary a police squad was suspended after robbing and beating illegal immigrants as a source of extra income, in Austria makeshift molotov cocktails were thrown at asylum centres, and hate-filled slogans were daubed on the walls of reception centres in France and Italy. In our own country you saw comparable phenomena here and there.

I tried to assuage Loubna's fury. That kind of vandalism was ultimately limited and obviously the work of short-sighted bullies who had nothing better to do. 'Rotten apples exist everywhere.' 'This will blow over.' Without meaning any harm, I let slip that I didn't find it entirely illogical, after such bloody attacks, that a few shocked members of the native population were venting their emotions, however wrong it was. Loubna almost exploded. She gave me a piece of her mind in a tirade that began in English and ended in her mother tongue.

She was proved right to the extent that the bullying and unpleasant incidents didn't stop but steadily increased. So did the provocations and invective on social media. She worried about those immensely, as she repeatedly stressed in her tirade. And as so often happens with quick-tempered teenagers, she then perhaps began to identify more and more with the victims of all that undeserved hatred. Their battle became her battle.

She wanted prosecutions as proof that effective sanctions existed.

In that sense her piety had started not with a prayer mat but with a piece of cloth that was rarely just a piece of cloth once you, as a teenaged girl, wound it around your head and then took yourself off to your secondary school.

Loubna knew perfectly well that she'd be sent to see the headmaster immediately. She was in her final year. Headscarf off or home for good, was the headmaster's multiple choice. Three guesses which Loubna opted for. She instantly lashed out at the man, calling him a racist, a fascist and other fine things. I suspect she wanted to make sure he'd never offer her a second chance. So that she'd never be tempted to accept such an opportunity.

When it came to burning bridges she needed no lessons from her father.

After that she refused to shake hands with other men too, besides the headmaster. Including us at home. She demanded that her brother and I, pathetic aboriginals, imitate her orthodox greeting 'out of respect'. That greeting turned out to come in three parts: make a loose fist with your right hand level with your heart, smile sheepishly and then nod briefly with your head cocked sideways. Rafiq burst out laughing on the first few occasions, but after being rebuked several times by his beloved sister he simply adopted the gesture.

As did I. To avoid any more tirades. Also because I found it a comical piece of pantomime. What had I got to lose by it? It wasn't as if Loubna and I had shaken hands all that often. Hardly ever, in fact. Now we were at least doing something together.

I nodded and smiled like crazy.

4.

SPYING ON YOUSSEF'S DAUGHTER

['I bought a state-of-the-art camera – cordless, tiny, expensive – and let myself into Loubna's room with my master key when she'd gone for a walk with Karima. I installed my hypermodern equipment so that, to protect Loubna, I had a perfect view of her room. Including her bed.']

No director could have staged or lighted the scene that finally destroyed everything more cleverly. I became the privileged and only spectator. It happened shortly before twelve on one of the first warm spring nights of the year. I'd opened the windows of my private domain; the sweet mock orange was already flowering but there weren't yet any mosquitoes.

Even if there had been hundreds of thousands of them and even if they'd been eating me up from top to toe, I still wouldn't have taken my eyes off what I saw on my laptop.

Crystal clear, and live this time.

In flattering pastel colours.

Loubna lay stretched out on the bed, on top of the sheet, her feet towards me. She was wearing nothing but an ankle chain and her headscarf. Her skin glowed with effort and with the spring heat. She kept her eyes closed, with a pained expression on her face, her admirable breasts moving up and down restlessly, and with great poise she twisted her hips. Her right hand was between her thighs, at the level of her girls' secret that now and then, in all its glory, revealed itself to the eye of my camera. Especially when I zoomed in.

Which I did only with some anxiety. Not that I was afraid my equipment might give me away – there was no zooming noise. But I wasn't sure I could survive so much beauty.

Of course I ought to have felt guilty and stopped immediately. I realize that now. My peeping was scandalous. The girl was barely of age and the daughter of a dear friend.

What I was up to was disgusting.

The temptation to carry on looking was too great, however. And I had morally exonerated myself in advance, during many previous evenings and nights of surveillance before or after she fell asleep.

As long as she remained unaware of being watched, she wasn't bothered by it. Was she? I wasn't doing her any kind of injustice. I wasn't robbing her of anything, I wasn't forcing her to do anything, I wasn't insulting her and I definitely wasn't throwing stones at her. In fact I was paying a great tribute to her, in silence and from a distance, by admiring her without troubling her at all. Of course the sight aroused me, but that was a side-effect, not a motivation. My intentions were pure. Loubna was of a beauty that transcended all perversion.

The self-deceit of these arguments was obvious, but I was firmly convinced by them. After the first few nights I even considered installing a microphone, so that I could listen to Loubna breathing while she slept. I knew for certain that it would be music to my ears. More stirring than Mahler, more subtle than Satie.

I would rarely have switched to Spotify Classic.

Perfect beauty lies in the unexpected detail, the surprising aberration – the famous beauty spot. With Loubna it was her headscarf. I was touched by the fact that she was wearing it even now. It

was a sign of her obstinacy and her pride. I knew from previous evenings that she often wore it indoors and usually didn't take it off until she was about to go to sleep, just before she turned out the light. Apart from being a religious symbol it was for her a wholly personal emblem of provocative modesty.

Apparently neither stood in the way of the sin of self-gratification. Cynics would have ridiculed Loubna, had they known. I, who did know – and since then have never been able to forget – found her all the more desirable on that bed, with that veil around her face and those hands between her legs. I could have cheered, because she hadn't allowed herself to be deprived of all pleasure.

Despite the trance in which I too now found myself, accentuated, as it were, by the chilled red sancerre I was drinking, I felt an occasional stab to my heart. It was only a short time since I'd been forced to get rid of Hannibal. I missed my cockerel, I was still sad and angry when I thought of his fate. But when it came to incontestable magnificence I had to admit that Loubna had stolen the beauty crown from him for good. She was now supreme.

It wasn't beauty alone that connected them. Loubna too had turned up out of nowhere, so to speak. They'd both fallen into my lap without me having to go looking for them. They were even more intimately related than that. Without the loss of Hannibal I would never have decided to buy video equipment. Without him I would never have discovered this new source of comfort.

It made me feel grateful, despite my grief. Hannibal's spirit wasn't buried for good in a flowerbed. He still wandered around me and crowed triumph in my ear. He'd given me Loubna as glorious compensation for his death.

He had blazed a trail for beauty.

She was the little empress.

My little empress meanwhile was playing upon herself with just one finger – an elongated trill, performed on a delicate instrument. In search of the umpteenth highpoint. When it came to energy and determination she was more than a match for her brother. I could only continue to admire her. Watching intently for yet another climax, filled with empathy, I was suddenly struck by a dual insight.

Like most insights, these were so simple and clear that it was impossible to comprehend how I could have overlooked them for so long.

In reality – I was forced to acknowledge with shock – there was perhaps just one reason why I'd put up with Youssef's family all this time and not shown them the door: Loubna. I wasn't quite the philanthropist I'd thought I was. I was possessed by one magnificent child. I'd taken the rest on board with her. I'd been willing to swallow a lot just as long as she stayed close to me. And now I definitely never wanted to lose her. I wanted to know, to see how she did in her future life. I wanted to be there when she was happy. I wanted to be able to comfort and support her when she wasn't.

A second realization intruded immediately. How could I have failed to think of it before? I could save Loubna, and her loved ones with her. If she was indeed so special to me, and if since my crying fit we'd formed such a special bond – why shouldn't we give that desire and that bond an official framework? It would involve a mountain of paperwork, and no doubt a number of tough interrogations by the immigration services, but why shouldn't Loubna and I enter into matrimony? It would make her legal position inviolable and strengthen those of her relatives.

I wouldn't demand the physical fulfilment of such a marital union. Or only if Loubna, by way of gratitude, insisted upon it herself. If not, then I would accept that fact without any problem. I would resign myself to my role. Officially I'd be her husband in every sense, in practice I'd be her irreplaceable tower of strength no matter what, her defence against violence and persecution, her

definitive ticket to Fortress Europe, with mother and brother in train.

I could be of essential importance to Loubna. I myself was the key. Her father had saved me. I could do the same for her.

Sitting there daydreaming and enjoying the prospect of my future role in life, my attention to my computer had lapsed somewhat. Which explains why I'd failed to notice that Loubna was barely moving and no longer had her eyes shut. They were wide open and she was looking with a frown straight into the eye of the camera.

And therefore, through the laptop, straight into my face.

I choked on the sancerre, in instant panic, gasping for breath, afraid of what was coming before it happened. Meanwhile the astonished horror on Loubna's face was growing. She briefly shook her head, as if to drive off a bothersome insect. Still looking at me in utter disbelief, she then slowly sat up. At the same time she hesitantly put her left arm across her breasts to cover her small nipples.

I felt my stomach tighten as she jumped out of bed and walked straight towards the camera.

The last I saw of Loubna was her delightful renaissance face, looking at me from close proximity with anger and disgust, after which her free hand reached for the camera.

The next moment the screen of my laptop went blank.
